

Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun creates confrontation by canvas at the Museum of Anthropology

A 40-year survey of the artist's work tackles issues from racism to pipelines

BY ROBIN LAURENCE APRIL 27, 2016



Christy Clark and the Kinder Morgan Go-Go Girls, 2015, acrylic on canvas

At no point during his long and impressive career has anyone accused Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun of quietly accepting the status quo.

The world-view of this First Nations artist is, like his powerful and distinctive paintings, charged with confrontation, condemnation, and angry humour. Seated in his big Mount Pleasant studio, working on a wire sculpture of a human figure, Yuxweluptun talks to the *Georgia Straight* about his upcoming exhibition at the Museum of Anthropology, and some of the issues embodied within the 40-year survey of his art.

“I’m interested in recording history,” he says simply—not that the history he records is simple. Oil spills, clearcuts, climate change, declining fish stocks, land claims, systemic racism, the legacies of colonialism and residential schools, the growing divide between the rich and the poor: all these subjects clamour for attention in his art and his life.

During the interview, Yuxweluptun also calls out the Indian Act, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, the Mount Polley Lake mine disaster, the former Conservative government’s attitude towards missing and murdered First Nations women, the land-claims process, and the CEOs and shareholders of high-polluting, resource-extracting corporations.

A 2015 painting, *Christy Clark and the Kinder Morgan Go-Go Girls*, depicts three masked women in suits, standing in a row. Their long talons and extended tongues—one of them forked—clearly express the artist’s opposition to the project they advocate: the proposed tripling of the capacity of Kinder Morgan’s Trans Mountain pipeline, with its consequential increase in oil-tanker traffic in Burrard Inlet.

“Even with the example of the small oil spill in the bay here, the government was not so ready,” Yuxweluptun says, referring to the incident, a year ago, when some 3,000 litres of bunker fuel leaked from a cargo ship moored in English Bay. Relatively minor though that spill was, it fouled local beaches, birds, and marine life. “There is no preparedness and she wants to put more pipelines through?” he asks. “Ram it down our throats?”

Despite—or possibly because of—its biting and satirical message, the painting recently commanded \$100,000 at a Vancouver Art Gallery fundraising auction. Government officials may not be attuned to his art, but collectors and curators certainly are.

“Art remains a space of contestation,” MOA director Anthony Shelton writes in *Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun: Unceded Territories*, the catalogue to the exhibition. Yuxweluptun’s work, Shelton continues, contests “the ongoing legacy and practice of colonial despoliation of unceded land and resources in British Columbia, and parallel attempts to destroy the Indigenous cultures of this place”.

Yuxweluptun shrugs and says, “People always say I’m very political, but this is just everyday life for Native people, and for people from British Columbia.”

He credits the social activism of his Coast Salish father and Okanagan mother with attuning him to the subjects that fuel his art and his beliefs. “They were involved in Native organizations in the early years, so I grew up with it and normalized myself within an understanding of what life is for Native people,” he says, then adds, “This is a very racist country.” He thinks reserves, which he describes as “internment camps”, should be abolished, and says the Indian Act should be called “the White Supremacy Act”.

Yuxweluptun, who studied at the then Emily Carr College of Art and Design, does not communicate his themes through “traditional” Northwest Coast First Nations art forms such as masks and poles carved in cedar, but through paintings in the European modernist tradition. He builds his two-dimensional images out of indigenous design elements such as ovoids and U-forms, employing brilliant, almost psychedelic colours, and surmounting his human figures with masks benign and ferocious, cunning and obtuse.

His style has often been likened to surrealism but he prefers to call it “visionism”. “The symbolic forms are interchangeable, based on my needs when I make a painting,” he says in his artist’s statement. “The symbolism transforms into landscape and other forms to create a vision.”

The show’s subtitle, *Unceded Territories*, reveals one of Yuxweluptun’s major preoccupations: what he sees as a profoundly flawed land-claims process in a province whose First Nations peoples had never negotiated treaties with the federal government.

“We’ve never surrendered anything,” he says. “Land claims mean that, once and for all, we have to extinguish our rights.” Then he adds, “They’re sitting around talking millions? The land is worth trillions. So why are our chiefs even talking to the provincial government?”

Given the historic association of anthropology with colonialism, and given Yuxweluptun’s past highly vocal criticism of the Museum of Anthropology, which he used to call “the Morgue”, it’s surprising that he has agreed to have a comprehensive exhibition there. He admits that attitudes have changed—his and theirs.

He also says that he has reached a point in his career when he can exhibit at MOA without feeling compromised. “I never needed to be validated by the institution,” he says. “If I do show there, they’re just validating themselves.” Still, he adds, “It is a strange thing to be a modernist artist in an anthropological museum.”

Leaning against the east wall of Yuxweluptun’s studio is his most recent painting, an enormous work in progress depicting a Coast Salish spirit dance in a fire-lit longhouse. It records lived experience, he says, rather than something merely observed. As a young man, he was initiated as a Black Face dancer and a Sxwayxwey dancer, taking part in secretive rituals of which outsiders have little knowledge.

“Spirit dancing has always been a big influence on my life,” he says. Still, this ambitious work is not only about Native spirituality but also about repudiating foreign religious beliefs, imposed by missionaries, ministers, and priests, often within the context of residential schools.

“I’m not going to conform; I’m not going to be your good little Christian Indian,” he says. “I’m going to continue to sing in my longhouses and pray the way that I do.”

Early in his life, he inherited the Salish name Yuxweluptun, meaning “Man Who Possesses Many Masks”. A couple of years ago, he took part in a ceremony in Chilliwack and acquired the name Let’lo:ts’teltun, meaning “Man of Many Colours”.

“I had outgrown Yuxweluptun,” he says. “I’ve taken the name Let’lo:ts’teltun because I’ve changed as a person.”

Not that he has relinquished any of the satirical energy or righteous anger that has characterized his career: his recent “Super-Predator Series”, depicting world leaders, corporate bosses, bankers, and the über-wealthy one percent, is as fierce as anything he has produced. His painting *Fucking Creeps They’re Environmental Terrorists* shows petroleum and pipeline executives standing thigh deep in the oil they are spewing.

Still, reflecting on the evolution of his art, on the idea of visionism, on the nature of his unique style, he says, “I’ve been painting for 40 years, and you have to devote that much time to create, to think, to develop as an artist.”